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Private Governance and Norms on Athletic Teams at Small Residential Liberal Arts Colleges

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Abstract
This study examines private governance and informal social control within athletics at small residential liberal arts colleges. It draws on field interviews and participant observations, and builds on theories by Ellickson, Muller, and Friedman. Captains mainly serve as a critical intermediary of private governance by enforcing social norms, whereas coach overinvolvement and collective punishment undermine team cohesion and contradict the liberal educational mission. Non-coach staff and overlapping campus social networks further shape team culture and behavior. We find that athletic success depends less on coaching and raw athletic talent, and more on player-driven buy-in and social norms.

JEL Codes: D23; D71; K00
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I. Introduction

This research focuses on interactions between formal private governance and informal social control via norms. The setting is athletics at small, residential liberal arts colleges in NCAA Division

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III athletics. The findings are based on participant observations and field interviews. The interpretations build on social-scientific theories of spontaneous order.

In "A Critique of Economic and Sociological Theories of Social Control," Robert Ellickson (1987) argues that close-knit groups are necessary for informal social control. Such groups are marked by frequent face-to-face interactions, the circulation of reliable information (news, gossip, and the like), and the reciprocal power of members to hold one another accountable or reward one another for particular behaviors. Although the small size of residential liberal arts colleges might suggest that the student body forms a single close-knit group, Robin Muller (2003), in "Order Without Law at a Residential Liberal Arts College," shows that colleges of this kind are composed of smaller, fragmented groups that coexist. Muller nonetheless finds enough overlap among these groups, and enough connection among individual students, to give the student body a close-knit character. Examples of this overlap include international students who play on intercollegiate athletic teams, student-athletes who rush Greek organizations, and students from minority backgrounds who join majority-white athletic teams or Greek organizations.

In the book *Legal Systems Very Different From Ours*, Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek (2019) introduce several concepts useful for evaluating informal social control that can be applied to collegiate athletics. They identify four criteria that enable informal social control to function as private justice: *right makes might*, *commitment*, *protecting the weak*, and *terminating feud*. Under these criteria, "private norms of behavior are enforced by private action, at least some of which involves the threat of retaliation—true hostile gossip, and sometimes more."[1] We apply these criteria and mechanisms in analyzing team dynamics of informal social control.

Ellickson, Friedman, and the like study remote areas such as Iceland and cattle country in Shasta County, California. Some critics of the work on private rule enforcement say that the work is interesting, but largely just historical anomalies with little relevance to modern society. Why should modern observers care about how people settled disputes in Iceland more than half a millennium ago? It turns out that one can observe a lot of similarities between these

[1] Although negative gossip is often described as the most prevalent retaliation strategy, research shows that "ostracism is used very frequently in social settings and is likely the most effective way to punish an individual on a college campus" (interviewee quoted in Alcorn 2016).

cases and modern America.[2] Our research suggests that private governance and social norms play a critical role in athletic success, often rivaling the influence of coaching and athletic talent.

II. Club Goods and the Social Culture of Athletics

In his "Economic Theory of Clubs," Buchanan (1965) discusses how many economic goods are jointly produced and shared among members. A college itself can be considered a club where all of the students are members, and colleges also obviously have various smaller clubs with membership among subsets of students. As confirmed by our case study, athletes constitute a sizable minority of the student body at small liberal arts colleges. With hundreds of athletes in a student population of only a few thousand, athletic programs are central to campus culture simply because so many students participate. Larger universities enroll tens of thousands of students, yet only hundreds compete in varsity sports. Although those programs receive national recognition, they are less integrated into the social culture and overall dynamic of campus than athletic programs at small liberal arts colleges.[3] In our case study, around 35 percent of students are varsity athletes and up to 75 percent of the student body participates in varsity, club, or intramural sports. Campus dynamics at small liberal arts colleges may influence athletic success more than is commonly recognized, as participation in athletics affects an athlete's social status within the entire student body.

One of the main attractions of joining an athletic team at a small liberal arts college—whether or not athletes consciously seek it—is higher social standing and greater reputation on campus. In related research, Alcorn (2016) reports students saying that "freshmen athletes are able to bypass the traditional social hierarchy that is in place at [the College]" (interviewee quoted in Alcorn). Another student observed that "one of the best things about being an athlete

[2] Our work is part of a research program that builds on the foundation laid by Friedman, Ellickson, and others. Some recent case studies on private governance that appear in this journal include Makovi (2019), Maltsev (2022), Earle, Gulker, and Stringham (2022), and Shortland and Fortune Winton (2023).

[3] A student-athlete at a large state university stated that student bodies are sharply divided, with student-athletes functioning as a unit separate from other students (Interviewee 25). At small liberal arts colleges, by contrast, student-athletes and other students overlap considerably.

at [the College] is the built-in social life and team that allows you to kind of have status on campus right away" (Russell 2022).[4]

Other students join athletic programs for the networking opportunities they offer after graduation. Many teams maintain strong alumni networks and host networking events outside competition season; one team dedicates an entire month to such events (Interviewee 8). This is most pronounced on teams with larger rosters or strong records of success, which tend to receive more alumni support. At a small private business school in New England, joining an athletic team is often done purely for the networking opportunities membership provides. Social life there revolves around being on a team, networking for job opportunities, and making connections that advance social standing (Russell 2022). Ultimately, student-athletes automatically gain higher social status and make immediate connections on campus. A student-athlete's social status is already deeply intertwined with their athletic commitment as soon as they step foot on campus.

III. The Reason of Rules: Does Desire to Follow Private Rules Come from Admitted vs. Learned Culture?

Brennan and Buchanan (1985) suggest that certain rules are ex ante beneficial to the parties subject to them. Exactly what is beneficial depends on the preferences of the individuals, and with rules coming from clubs the question arises of how club "preferences" arise. Team dynamics are frequently shaped by the concept of *admitted vs. learned culture* (Giberson 2012). Admitted culture is the norms and values that incoming students bring with them each year; these cultures may evolve over time as admission patterns change. Many colleges admit large numbers of students from similar geographic regions and from similar private and boarding schools, reinforcing admitted culture. Learned culture, by contrast, is the gradual instillment of traditional, mainstream student norms through socialization at the college. As first-year students assimilate, they tend to emulate upperclassmen because the path to status and social opportunity depends on

[4] First-year men who are not part of an athletic team, a Greek organization, or another high-status group are among the most socially marginalized students on campus. They often struggle to gain entry to parties and social spaces without a direct connection. Gender norms and social biases allow first-year women in similar positions to climb the social ladder by dressing or presenting themselves in ways that align with the school's prevailing standards. Joining an athletic team, however, removes this barrier for first-year men.

mastering mainstream norms—what Giberson describes as "a form of acculturation" common to first-years nationwide.

Athletics at small liberal arts colleges mainly reflect admitted cultures because most athletes come from places near the school. While Division III colleges technically draw from a larger pool of athletes—more high school athletes meet Division III standards than Division I standards—that pool is significantly narrowed by other factors such as academic selectivity, recruitment funding, and costly tuition. Because these schools are smaller and often academically rigorous, they ultimately recruit from a highly selective group of student-athletes in local regions who meet athletic, academic, and even social standards.

Admitted cultures can cause challenges for players who do not fit them, creating dire considerations for coaches when recruiting. For example, one team reported a new recruit from the other side of the country who brought in conflicting norms to an admitted culture. The player ultimately transferred to another institution (Interviewee 17). This is not to say that an outsider cannot reshape a team's ideology—we have observed team cultures evolve under the leadership of upperclassmen and captains. However, an admitted culture makes bonding much easier for players who already share it—the vast majority on most teams at small liberal arts colleges.

Some teams have successfully developed a learned culture where athletes bring in different social norms. These teams are able to succeed with these learned cultures, but they are often co-ed sports composed of athletes that compete individually. Learned cultures often impair success on teams whose performance depends on collective coordination—sports like volleyball and football, or relay events in track and field.

Ultimately, coaches play a strong role in maintaining an admitted culture or adopting a learned culture when making recruiting decisions. As one coach put it, "We want someone who fits the culture, loves the school, and is a good human being, which is more important than the athletic piece" (Interviewee 22). These factors often outweigh raw talent in recruiting decisions.

IV. Why Athletes Voluntarily Restrain Themselves with Private Rules: Buy-In

Individual athletes may want to voluntarily agree to a set of private governance structures if they see benefits from them. We can think of buy-in mentality as a type of informal private governance and

among the most crucial elements of team success. At its core, buy-in has two components: (1) agreement about the team's ultimate goals for the season and the expectations placed on members (the *end*), and (2) agreement about the most efficient and effective means of achieving those goals (the *means*). Genuine buy-in requires players to internalize both dimensions; members must not only recognize the team's objectives but also believe in the methods used to pursue them. Mere agreement is insufficient. Players must perceive the chosen goals and methods as the best available options; otherwise commitment may be superficial or fragile, leading to unsuccessful seasons.

The best teams describe their success in exactly these terms. They "buy into their coach and the team" wholeheartedly, even when they disagree with specific norms or policies (Interviewee 10). You do not need the best players, scheme, or coaches; you just need "a group of people willing to go to war behind what their coach is preaching and fully buy into it" (Interviewee 10). The most successful coaches recruit for this. Through fully player-driven movements, successful teams establish standards for themselves—often posted in the locker room as a daily reminder—that define them as a program. As one player put it, the team has "always been on the same page from our captains and leaders," with "team goals that everyone follows" (Interviewee 7). The key point is that players are aligned with the captains and leaders, not with the coaches. Many coaches insert themselves into team dynamics to maintain social control, arguing that "someone has to enforce team rules" (Interviewee 16). But when players genuinely buy in, they generate natural team ideologies—shared values and practices that guide the team. With genuine buy-in, formal enforcement becomes largely unnecessary.[5]

Players buy in most strongly to coaches who are well known and respected on campus, who understand and respect their athletes, and who maintain strong relationships with the rest of the coaching staff and athletic department. Players on such teams describe their program as having a "culture of success" and say they "buy into [the Coach's] culture because it is known to work and earn us respect from students, staff, and alumni" (Interviewee 7). Players want to buy in not only because it promotes success but also because it confers the reputation and social status athletes so often seek.

[5] As one coach acknowledged, "The only thing [that makes us successful] is our team's 'buy-in' to being great" (Interviewee 11).

Buy-in looks different on every team. One of its largest drivers is the creation of clearly defined norms that all members agree to and abide by, and these norms have their biggest effect when they are player driven. For some teams, norms remain unspoken—a mutual understanding—while for others they take the form of a written or verbal contract. The 24–48-hour drinking rule is the clearest example, but other widely shared norms include arriving early to practice ("if you're on time, you're late" is a common refrain), wearing the right practice gear, eating together in the dining hall, and participating in "voluntary" team events.[6]

Some teams actively reaffirm their norms each season—buying in by signing documents or making verbal commitments. This practice is largely player driven and is especially common on teams that have experienced significant success. One team began doing this within the past two years and has had immense success since. The coach explained that their team created a "list of rules [and goals] that they put on the locker room door that they stick to" (Interviewee 11). The initiative was player driven, and each player signed off in what amounted to a code of conduct. Discussing enforcement, the coach said, "I can make you do it, but if I am making you do it, we are only going to be so good" (Interviewee 11). The consensus is that norms and rules are most effective when they come from the players. which highlights Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek's (2019) fourth criterion of justice, *terminating feud*. The simplest form of feud termination is direct, in-person resolution between the players involved. Resolving conflicts between players is much easier when norms are explicit and expectations are clear.

Another key factor is having captains whom players and coaches both regard as central to team structure: A captain without respect has no influence. Teams that attribute their success to buy-in also report strong attendance at, and genuine desire to attend, optional team events such as out-of-season training, movie nights, planned and unplanned team meals, and volunteer activities. Finally, such teams develop strong working relationships and mutual respect with all staff connected to the program, including liaisons, strength and conditioning coaches, athletic trainers, and, most importantly, the head coach. A young, relatable assistant coach reinforces this

[6] Sport-related norms are typically set by coaches; social norms are enforced by players.

mentality on most teams. Ultimately, buy-in must exist in some form on every successful team, though it need not look the same on each.

A central question for sustaining buy-in is whether there is meaningful overlap between a coach's goals and the players' goals. Misalignment or ambiguity creates friction and weakens commitment. Buy-in is strongest when it emerges from a player-led culture, often cultivated by captains who model and reinforce internal team norms. Even so, buy-in can break down—particularly when coaches demand commitment excessively or aggressively. When buy-in is authentic and mutual, it remains the single most consistent predictor of team achievement.

V. Captains as Agents of Private Governance

Another major contributor to successful private rules is the establishment of respected captains. Players on every team described captains as crucial to the structure and success of their teams; the quality of the captains matters as much as their existence. Coaches rely on captains to disseminate norms and ideologies, and players rely on captains as middlemen who observe the team and report problems. Many struggling teams share this mentality but lack player-driven dynamics because their coaches are overinvolved.[7] One successful coach echoed this point, saying, "If we have good captains, we are going to be better. If I am leading the team, we will only be so good" (Interviewee 11). Coaches become a barrier to success when they insert themselves into team ideology; they can enforce norms only when they are face-to-face with the team, which they are far less often than captains. Captains' views align closely with the players', and enforcement by them is highly effective because of frequent face-to-face contact outside formal team events.[8] Players consistently expressed the need for captains, observing that "winning comes more from captains than from coaches" (Interviewee 21).

Many coaches believe captains are unnecessary but appoint them if their players want them. As one coach said, "Captains specifically do not impact the team, but leaders do. Nobody has that much influence and control as an individual [on a team]" (Interviewee 22).

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[7] As one administrator put it, "The success of a team is about the players, not the coach" (Interviewee 1). Players on a record-breaking team observed that "a good coach can only do so much" (Interviewee 10).

[8] Coaches are often away for extended periods due to recruiting duties and conference rules that limit coach-player interaction in the off-season, making captain-led leadership essential.

Having captains does not diminish anyone else's leadership; it channels the dispersed leadership of all players toward a common goal. This illustrates Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek's (2019) second criterion of justice in "Feud Law": *commitment*. With captains in place, players can trust that someone will commit to resolving issues both individually and for the team. When all upperclassmen attempt to govern collectively, commitment dissipates.

Looking at Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek's (2019) third criterion of justice, *protecting the weak*, captains with knowledge, experience, and standing protect those who lack standing within the team or the broader student body. When a team lacks captains, there is no protection for those who lack standing. In the locker room and in all the spaces teams occupy without coaches, "word means more from a captain than a non-captain" (Interviewee 12), and "people look up to captains, especially when they need help outside of a sport setting" (Interviewee 19).

When coaches do appoint captains, most regard the role as administrative. One coach said that "being a captain is only a title" and that "it is very hard logistically to not have captains," so captains exist primarily for the coach's convenience (Interviewee 22). This stance can undermine captains' work and inhibit the buy-in mentality that drives success. Some coaches compare college athletics to professional athletics; a coach at a small liberal arts college argued that because professional teams in their sport rarely have captains, their college team should not either (Interviewee 6). In professional sports, however, buy-in arises from the nature of the league and from the fact that the sport is the players' career. Professional teams may not need captains to generate buy-in, but college teams at small residential liberal arts colleges do.

Coaches must understand that captainship is not about what the coach wants but about cultivating the team dynamic that produces the greatest success. As one coach put it, it is "my program, but your team" (Interviewee 7)—and captains are the key to leading that team to success.

VI. Bottom-Up Versus Top-Down Private Rule Enforcement: "Things Never Turn Out Well When the Coach Gets Involved"

Rule enforcement in clubs can take many forms and can come from the individual club members or higher-ups within the organization. Previous research on informal social control and team dynamics has shown that the relationship between players and coaches can become

especially murky in the realms of justice and social control. Alcorn and coauthors' earlier studies found that "coaches set punishments that are often excessive (sometimes counterproductive), coaches are less in tune than captains with athletes' lives, and captains depend more on athletes' respect than on coaches" (interviewee quoted in Alcorn 2016). All of this contributes to a common saying: "When the coaches get involved, nobody ever likes the outcome." To test this idea, we asked every student-athlete and coach we interviewed what they thought of the statement "Things never turn out well when coach gets involved." Most interviewees agreed that the statement is more complicated than it sounds and that its truth depends on the situation.

Players and coaches commonly agree that most issues can be handled internally. For example, we asked what the response would be if a teammate started dating someone's ex. All players said they would handle it internally; it was not worth sabotaging a strong team dynamic or involving the coach. Both responses illustrate Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek's (2019) first criterion of private justice: *right makes might*. When someone feels they have been wronged, they seek justice—in this case by resolving the situation internally rather than invoking formal governance through a coach. Informal social control by those most closely involved is the best remedy for conflict.

Nonetheless, coaches universally disagreed with the statement. They view their job—beyond competition—as caring for and managing the athletes, including keeping them safe and out of trouble. One coach said that "players need to realize that coach is the only ally" when they get into trouble (Interviewee 6).[9] Most coaches believe that players do not always make the best decisions and that coaches' experience can guide them. When coaches intervene in behavioral incidents, "it is to help athletes realize they are going down the wrong path" (Interviewee 8). Coaches must also consider their team's reputation, which reflects on their own coaching style and involvement.

The maxim "Things never turn out well when coach gets involved" applies in situations where it is reasonable to believe the coach will not find out about the behavior. It does not apply in situations where the coach will find out anyway, or where deans or

[9] The same coach reflected on the size and nature of these colleges, calling the statement a "crazy mindset to have at a place like [the College]; it is too small for things not to recirculate," adding, "we find out before we even wake up" (Interviewee 6).

athletic directors will hear first. Coaches worry that being blindsided will make them look as if they were not on top of their players' behavior. As multiple coaches put it, "When things are bad, let me hear from you before the dean. The sooner you get coach involved, the better" (Interviewee 14).[10]

VII. Close-Knit Groups and Informal Social Control: The Role of Non-Coach Staff Members

We are thinking about athletic teams as rule-enforcing clubs whose primary members are athletes. But many other individuals work around the peripheries of these clubs, including non-coach staff such as athletic trainers, strength and conditioning coaches, academic liaisons, mentors, and volunteer coaches. Unsurprisingly, athletes' relationships with non-coach staff differ from their relationships with coaches. The ability of non-coach staff to officially enforce rules is all but absent, but they nevertheless participate in the system of informal private governance. As one staff member at a small liberal arts college put it, "The relationship we have with kids is by nature different because it is not authoritarian. People come up to us with personal issues because they feel comfortable talking to us" (Interviewee 3), and as a result, the staff member often gives athletes help they otherwise would not have received.[11]

Strength and conditioning staff similarly provide workout environments that feel friendlier than the formal practice space. These environments also drive success. One staff member explained that "[our space] is a spot where a lot of kids excel . . . and fall in love with [the activity], who maybe weren't the best player on the team or didn't play on the team . . . and this room became the place where they could be the best . . . at something" (Interviewee 4). Within athletic communities at small residential liberal arts colleges, spaces run by non-coach staff foster friendly and emotionally stable dynamics that translate into greater success in competition.

These spaces also function as gossip centers, with gossip being one of the first stages of motivation or informal control in Ellickson's (1994) discussion of order without law. These spaces are

[10] Players and coaches alike have concluded that "if coach has to get involved, you know [the situation] is bad, but it is not necessarily [a] bad [thing] for them to get involved" (Interviewee 7).

[11] Because non-coach staff lack authority over athletes, they have an easy path to friendship and can promote athletic success and emotional regulation in ways coaches cannot.

neutral venues in which "coaches and players will come to gossip to the [staff members]" (Interviewee 3). Across small residential liberal arts colleges, areas like athletic training rooms see the most gossip about other teams within the program and across the league.[12] Everyone in the athletic department shares gossip in these locations because the staff who oversee them cannot punish either the gossipers or those being gossiped about: They share just enough to be useful while withholding what could harm those involved. One non-coach staff member said they often hear negative talk about coaches—such as that a pregame practice was too challenging—but they never engage with or pass on the gossip, even though they believe both parties would be better off if the coach knew (Interviewee 4).[13] Similarly, athletes and coaches frequent these spaces to learn the "inside scoop," which boosts the standing of whoever shares the information.

Non-coach staff-member relationships act as prime examples of Ellickson's theory of close-knit groups, which are necessary for informal social control (Ellickson 1987). Non-coach staff members are formal figures who play a strong role in the social dynamic of athletic teams because they act as informal figures in these settings. For example, different gossip centers produce different patterns of reputation management. In strength and conditioning centers, any gossip shared there stays within the close-knit group of the team and strength and conditioning coaches because inter-team interaction in the space is limited (Interviewee 17). Reputation management is therefore minimal; the environment confers a positive reputation on team members simply by their showing up. The athletic training room, in contrast with the informal training facilities, demands significant reputation management because of constant inter-team gossip. It functions as a close-knit group composed of athletes who belong to other close-knit groups—their own teams. Information overload occurs here as teams talk with one another and with trainers, and athletes must verify what they hear against other sources because of the sheer volume of information. We can see how interactions among close-knit groups in various athletic spaces on campus have the potential to change social dynamics on teams and

[12] As one trainer put it, "All the news related to athletics breaks in the training room" (Interviewee 3).

[13] This view was widely shared among non-coach staff, who withhold information to protect those involved, especially student-athletes.

within the department, without having any connection to the physical component of the sport itself.

Although assistant coaches are official members of a team, they function with a parallel dynamic to non-coach staff members. Athletes often view them as more in touch with their lives and frequently "do the relationship building on teams" (Interviewee 6).[14] Some athletes see the head coach as a more authoritative figure and the assistant coaches as people they can connect with personally. They even "treat other coaches as a friend, whereas the head coach is more serious" (Interviewee 7). Many teams find that when relationships with the head coach are distant, strong relationships with assistant coaches compensate—and that dynamic is usually preferable.

VIII. When Sanctions Are Enforced: Collective Punishment vs. the Higher Educational Mission

How do teams respond when members break the norms agreed upon by the team? Our interviews reveal two practices that look similar on the surface but operate differently: collective sanctions imposed by captains, and collective sanctions imposed by coaches.

Collective sanctions imposed by captains are an exercise of peer authority tightly constrained by emergent team norms and by the limits of the captain's formal authority. Captains sometimes have a team absorb a consequence together after an individual or a small group has broken a norm. One team's captains responded to a preseason curfew violation by making everyone run, reasoning that "by making the individual's actions affect the whole team, it helped to make sure this issue did not arise again" (interviewee quoted in Alcorn 2016). The thought is that the wrongdoer, newly mindful of teammates' well-being and resentment, will hesitate to occasion collective punishment again. Within this paper's framework, collective sanctions by captains nonetheless register as buy-in rather than imposition because the captains are elected peers operating within norms the team itself authored. Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek's (2019) second criterion of justice, *commitment*, is satisfied:

[14] One athlete put it this way: "You are not really supposed to like your head coach because they make the tough decisions and are the authority figure. There will always be someone who does not like them, but assistant coaches bridge this gap" (Interviewee 10).

The team commits to enforcing its own rules, and captains carry that commitment forward.

Coaches, too, impose collective sanctions, but the logic is different. Hylland (2024, p. 58) presents an anonymized case in which a women's team lost a difficult conference match and "the coach had the whole team run on the treadmill to punish the team for not being fit enough to win their matches." A second case is more telling because the wrongdoers were known. After the captains reported that more than half the team had gone out the night before a Tuesday game, "Coach cancelled practice and each teammate was required to write a letter addressing whether they were committed to the team or not" (pp. 2–3). However, collective punishment is not a fool-proof measure to correct wrongdoing. Coaches often carry out this form of punishment without noting potential disadvantages. Collective sanctions reduce innocent athletes' opportunities for (a) team practice, (b) individual skill formation with coaches, and, in the case of reflection letters, (c) academic study. Coaches similarly observe that authorities impose collective sanctions in other campus contexts and infer that they may do likewise—without probing whether the structural rationale carries over to a team.

For example, an internal source of authorization is the slogan "No I in team." Properly used, the slogan targets individual wrongdoers—the player who pursues personal statistics at the team's expense. However, the slogan lends itself to psychological slippage and manipulation. Coaches and players, often without noticing the move, extend it from a norm against selfishness to a norm of indiscriminate collective punishment. When a coach invokes "No I in team" to justify running the squad after a loss caused by a few players' choices, the move trades on the slogan's legitimate sense to authorize a different practice the slogan does not properly license. Righteous athletes often see through the move but hesitate to challenge it lest they appear guilty of the very selfishness the slogan was meant to suppress. A grassroots teaching moment is lost. Many athletes simply internalize the extended norm—the norm of collective punishment itself.

Small residential liberal arts colleges promise to teach judgment, leadership, and the capacity for self-governance, and they present athletics as a locus of that promise. Yet collective punishment by coaches works at cross-purposes to the educational mission in various ways. First, the misdirection of penalties normalizes indiscriminate symbolic punishment. A student then discounts their

ability to avoid punishment. This rational response perversely reduces individual incentives for responsible behavior. Second, talent insulates athletes from proportional individual consequences. Players accurately intuit that coaches contrive collective penalties partly to avoid the condign individual punishments that might hamper team performance. This insulation selectively reduces incentives for responsible behavior. Third, athletes adapt to indiscriminate punishment by reinforcing the code of silence about wrongdoing since identifying the wrongdoer does not protect the team from collective cost (interviewee quoted in Alcorn 2016). Collective punishment by authorities is, in a word, illiberal. That it plays a large and largely unremarked role at small residential liberal arts colleges devoted to liberal education is a notable contradiction.

IX. Functional Overlapping Jurisdictions Among Clubs: Crossover Between Greek-Life Involvement and Athletics

In a work with many parallels to Friedman, Leeson, and Skarbek (2019) and Ellickson (1994), Frey (2005) discusses how, when rules come from clubs, people may be members of various clubs that can be distinct or overlap. There is a considerable overlap of membership in the two main types of rule-enforcing clubs that we studied. Greek organizations and varsity athletics constitute the largest pools of students on the campuses we studied. These groups dominate the social scene, and at schools with Greek organizations, there is significant crossover in membership. One administrator noted that "Greek life control[s] the social scene" and that athletes "are a part of the GLO [Greek letter organization] scene, though they do not overwhelm it." Athlete involvement in Greek life "ebbs and flows" from year to year (Interviewee 2). Even so, attitudes toward Greek-organization membership from the athletic side of campus remain overwhelmingly negative.

A member of the athletic training staff observed that "joining Greek life is one of the biggest points of contention between athletes and coaches, particularly with men's sports" (Interviewee 3). Some coaches have explicitly told players that if they rushed, "they would probably get kicked off the team" (Interviewee 12). Another coach recalled observing, during a football game, a group of sorority members who were "so drunk they could not walk," and said the moment confirmed Greek life's reputation for them: "If this was our team, I would lose my job" (Interviewee 18).

The stigma surrounding Greek organizations and pledging is usually tied to athletic performance since many coaches and staff observe how they "can clearly see a drop-off in performance, attitude, and attention" while athletes rush and pledge (Interviewee 6). Despite the stigma, many athletes maintain membership in both their sports teams and Greek organizations for all four years because of the positive impact that campus and Greek-life involvement can indirectly have on a team.

Greek-life membership, and participation in other campus groups, does not undermine athletic buy-in. What matters is that athletes buy into the commitment that takes priority at any given moment. During the season, athletes can focus on their sport while still retaining Greek-organization membership; once the season ends, they can fully participate in the social scene. One coach noted how an athlete "proved them wrong" on Greek-life involvement (Interviewee 8). That athlete joined an organization with a campus reputation for siphoning off athletes who then quit their sports, yet they showed that some athletes can manage both commitments without sacrificing performance. The athlete went on to break records and have a storied career. Greek organizations can bring teams together and integrate athletes into the social scene (for example, by inviting teammates to parties). They expand support networks for athletic teams, as fellow Greek-organization members often attend their teammates' games.

X. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that athletic success at small residential liberal arts colleges is shaped not only by talent, coaching strategy, or institutional resources, but also by systems of private governance operating within and alongside teams. Drawing on theories of informal social control developed by Robert Ellickson and David Friedman, among many others, we find that athletic teams function as close-knit groups that generate and enforce their own norms through player-led mechanisms. Within these groups, social status, reputation, and interpersonal accountability often exert a greater influence on behavior than formal authority.

The most successful teams consist of players who fully internalize their team's norms, respect their coaching staff, and follow captains who lead through consensus and example. Rather than relying primarily on coaches to maintain order—a form of centralized leadership—these teams cultivate cultures in which players hold one

another accountable, resolve conflicts internally, and reinforce norms through daily interactions. Captains serve as crucial intermediaries, translating team values into practice and providing a trusted mechanism for leadership, conflict resolution, and social control. In contrast, teams that depend heavily on top-down authority often struggle to generate the same level of cohesion, commitment, and collective responsibility.

Our findings also suggest that informal governance extends beyond the boundaries of individual teams. Relationships with assistant coaches, athletic trainers, strength and conditioning staff, and other campus organizations contribute to the circulation of information, reputation formation, and the maintenance of team culture. Athletic teams at small residential liberal arts colleges therefore exist within a broader social network of overlapping close-knit groups that shape behavior and reinforce social norms.

More broadly, our research illustrates that the principles of private governance identified in prior studies remain highly relevant, even in contemporary settings. The same mechanisms that scholars like Ellickson and Friedman have observed in small communities, frontier societies, and other decentralized systems can be found within modern collegiate athletics. Athletic teams, particularly at small residential liberal arts colleges, provide a valuable case study of how individuals voluntarily submit to social norms, create intricate systems of accountability, and sustain order without intervention from formal authorities.

Ultimately, successful athletic teams are not simply large groups of talented individuals. They are privately governed communities governed by shared expectations, goals, norms, mutual accountability, and player-driven leadership. Understanding how these informal organizations develop and operate provides insight into not only athletic and team success, but also processes through which groups of people create order, build trust, and achieve collective goals.

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